A Single Decision (Take Two)

By: Timewatch (/u/1698214/Timewatch) (https://www.fanfiction.net/pm2/post.php?uid=1698214)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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Author's note: sorry guys, another long one, get the drinks

Chapter 40: The Unspoken Truce

The one hundred and eighth day since Komara had overthrown the King of Zygerria had now passed, and with it, Alazar Khwaramenes's calculated period of Separatist industrial output exceeding the Republic's. Grievous and his top officers gathered for yet another holo-conference on the state of the Confederacy.

"The Republic should be ahead of us in production, now," Grievous said, pointing at the little Givin's graph of projected numbers and the graph of the real numbers. "Why are we still ahead?"

"Chancellor Tarkin threw more wrenches into an already clogged machine, sir," said Khwaramenes. "Tarkin is building escort ships by the thousands, but even this program consumes less resources than the big star destroyers."

"These numbers don't add up," Rame Cartroll said. "Look at what's being shipped from the foundries to the shipyards. I don't care how many escort craft he's building, they don't need that much durasteel. Where's the rest of it going?"

"Who knows?" said Ricimer Eemon. "There's so many secret programs we hardly know anything about, other than the name. Take that Project Stardust, for example. What is it? We don't know. And by *we*, I do mean Caramm."

That the Carammites controlled Confederate intelligence was a fact lost on no one. How one small planet wielded such influence astounded Grievous. That no one in the wider galaxy seemed aware of their many spying eyes was even more astounding. Clothar Aclinde said the Republic's counter-intelligence was dismal aside from their top secret projects and front line military units. Even a child could do what he was doing. Aclinde didn't know how right he was, in the past two months, Komara had been supplying Grievous with information even Aclinde wasn't aware about. *The girl takes her job seriously,* Grievous had thought many times. He'd been keeping Komara's contributions secret from his spymaster, just to see how he'd react when the reality of the situation came to light.

"I don't like the idea of a secret fleet appearing out of nowhere," Mar Tuuk said, dragging Grievous's mind back to the topic at hand. "The losses we suffered during Striking Star and the northern counter-offensives have been largely replaced, but we are in effect limited to two mobile strike forces and a number of regional defensive fleets. The Republic could easily overwhelm us with a multi-front attack."

The only reason Grievous had two mobile strike forces was because he'd stripped many outlying systems of their garrison fleets, leaving defense to the ground troops, many of them now organic soldiers. Now the Confederacy had two long and powerful arms with which to fight, but the Republic had the potential for dozens. Tarkin was preoccupied with rebuilding the Republic's merchant fleet and bolstering its internal lines of communication and supply, even as half a thousand lone Separatist raiders caused what trouble they could from the Mid Rim into the Core. *Cataclysm* had recently rejoined them, once again sending waves of panic across the Holonet.

"Work has begun on the first flight of *Oceanas*," Grievous told them. "There will be design flaws and operational difficulties which we will work out through battlefield testing. But I am confident these new warships will help us hold the line, when Tarkin turns his attention outwards again."

"These two months of quiet have been nice," said Pors Tonith, sipping his vile Diagona tea. "It's the first break we've had in almost a year."

The northern offensive to link the Mygeeto pocket with the main Confederate holdings had exhausted both sides. The Republic's last fleet with a stockpiled fuel supply had been beaten back, but only at immense cost, leaving Grievous and his Loyalist counterparts alike less than eager to commit to pitched battle. The media was calling it an unofficial, unspoken truce. *Idiots,* Grievous thought. Ships were being lost each day, there were tens of thousands of casualties per week in even minor regions. But no major operations were ongoing by either side, and that was all the media cared about. Tarkin and Grievous both seemed to agree they needed breathing room. And they both knew it was only a matter of time before things picked up again.

Khwaramenes had started talking about industrial output again. "Every day we hold our lead in ship production is the best possible thing that can happen," he was saying. "Ships are the lifeblood of the galaxy. I daresay we should ask planets to pay us in ships instead of taxes." *Were it so easy,* thought Grievous.

"I have a task for you all," Grievous said to them. "Tarkin has been building the Republic's escort fleet from nothing, sacrificing capital ship production to do so. If we set back the escort fleet's production, he'll be stuck building more. Identify for me where to hit the Republic, so that I never see a new star destroyer ever again."

His officers liked that notion. After the meeting, Grievous took his shuttle to go see the stray he'd picked up on Agamar. He had a plan for that girl.

"*A Jedi without a lightsaber?*" Grievous had asked, as Kenobi's gunship fled for safety. Sanya had stared up at him, trembling, limbs paralyzed by fear, eyes flooded with tears.

"*No, no, I'm not a Jedi,"* she had stammered from the ground where she'd been dropped, her knees too weak to support her any further. "*I didn't even make padawan, I don't have a lightsaber, I'm just an agri-corps worker*-"

"*There's no sport in killing a Jedi who doesn't carry a weapon!*" Grievous had fumed. "*Take her away!*"

The magnaguards seized her. Those cold metal hands had shoved her aboard one of the wheelbikes, carrying her further and further away from safety. At the time, it'd been a nightmare. She had been so close to getting back to Loyalist lines, she'd been minutes away. And just as she'd stepped foot aboard that gunship, the nightmare had reared its head again, and pulled her back down into its darkest depths. After nearly five days without food and hardly more than a liter of water, after seven months of back-breaking manual labor, Sanya had been too exhausted to make sense of it. She didn't even have the will to struggle. *That's it, then,* she'd thought, *this is how I die, a captive in some Separatist execution vid.* That might have been a mercy, had she known what strange fate awaited her.

Sanya had started to think of them as trials. The first trial was Grievous dragging her from her cell into a deserted hallway aboard his flagship. He'd thrown a lightsaber at her, and then unleashed his magnaguards. He'd watched without a world as she struggled and flailed against the droids, who toyed with her mockingly. After a few hours of the torture by electrostaff, Sanya had been tossed back into her cell in isolation. But he'd left her a blank datapad. Its memory was limited to a few thousand characters, but Sanya couldn't resist. For lack of anything else to do in her cell, she wrote on it, fully aware she was being snooped on.

The second trial had been stranger. Sanya didn't even know what she'd been looking at. A mess of machine parts. She tried to put some back together following instructions Grievous had left her, but she achieved nothing. Back into the cell she'd gone. But now, her datapad had more memory unlocked.

The third was something she *could* do: moving potted plants from one pot to another. Sanya quickly recognized them as a kind of bean-growing vine from Neimoidia, used in hydroponics bays by almost every Trade Federation ship. Transplanting them was a delicate procedure, they were flimsy and sensitive plants. Sanya got through it all, and then she'd been put in the cell again. Once again, her datapad had more storage space than it had when she'd left. They had to be giving its system access to more memory. Sanya knew what they were doing, they were bribing her to complete whatever task they set in front of her. And she went along with it.

More trials came, seemingly at random. Reading, mathematics, memory, puzzles, problems, and more; Grievous silently observed, never uttering a single word. Sanya didn't know how much time passed, the lighting was always the same wherever she was. It was as if she'd fallen into some vortex, stuck in an unending set of increasingly odd tasks given to her by the evil monster that had taken her captive. All she had was her datapad, where she kept track of how many times she went to sleep. It was the one thing allowed to her besides her prisoner's smock. Maybe a real Jedi would have refrained from revealing their inner thoughts on something the enemy was surely reading, but Sanya couldn't resist. She had no other outlet, no contact with a single living thing other than the half-dead cyborg. She vented out all her anger, frustration, fear, regret, and spite on that little device, aimed at everyone and anyone, from the Republic and the Confederacy to Obi-wan Kenobi and General Romodi. *Let the Seppies think of it as they will,* she thought.

One day–at least Sanya thought it was day–Sanya woke up groggy, unaware of ever having fallen asleep, and realized her setting changed. The walls were slightly darker, the lights a little dimmer, the hum of the engines was gone. At first she'd thought she'd finally gone crazy, but no. *They moved me, they must have. Did they drug me? Was I hypnotized? Mind-wiped? This isn't Grievous's flagship anymore.* The General's silent visits became less common, Sanya was left in her cell in silence and loneliness. Her food arrived through a slit in the door, so someone was looking out for her. *If this is how I'm going to spend the rest of my life, I should have told that Horrible Thing I was a real Jedi!* she wrote in her datapad, which had become her diary, full of multi-page ramblings about every subject she could imagine. It had the memory for billions of characters now.

The next time she woke up, though, Grievous appeared, apparently summoned. *No no no,* Sanya thought, *I didn't mean it! I don't actually want to die!* He beckoned for her to step out of her cell. "What is it?" asked Sanya, in a small voice. She couldn't stop the shaking in her hands. There were no magnaguards, he'd come alone.

Grievous looked down at her with a bored disdain. He placed her in a bare metal seat before a bare metal table. On the table was a lightsaber, and what looked like a security key used to open doors. The cyborg had disarmed himself completely, and stood with his back to her. Sanya's mouth opened but she had no words. *What the hell? Why is he giving me a chance to kill him?*

Her eyes drifted to the security key, and then to the door behind her. It had a slot for a key, just like this one. *Oh,* thought Sanya. *This is another trial. What matters more to me? Killing Grievous, or my freedom? Wait a second, why couldn't I do both? Cut him down, and then escape!*

Sanya kept her hands in her lap.

No, that's too easy. First of all, that door probably won't even open with this key, second of all, I don't believe for one second Grievous would put himself in a position where his life was on the line. Third of all, I don't know where I am and how I'd survive getting out of here... She sighed. "Both these options are stupid," she said. "I'm not falling for it."

Grievous turned, cloak whirling around him, and regarded her intently, like a predatory bird. "Good," he said. The first words he'd spoken to her since her capture, however long ago that was now. Sanya's heart skipped a beat at the sound of another voice. She hated herself for how hearing even Grievous's growling, machine-infused voice could fill her with such relief.

"Oh, wow, you can talk again," Sanya said, her voice faint. "So I guess I passed this trial?"

"A trial?" Grievous nodded, ear-antennae wiggling. "Yes, I suppose it is a trial... You have passed. There is a brain in that little head of yours. I cannot say the same of most of your order."

"I don't want to agree with you, but I do."

Grievous collected the lightsaber and the key. "You are no warrior, Devaronian. Nor are you brave."

Uh, okay, Sanya thought.

"You could have killed me, you could have escaped, and I'm sure you thought about doing both. Though you wouldn't have been able to kill me, and that key would only get you past this door, not the magnagaurds in the next room. You were too cautious to rush into action and too cowardly to save your Republic by taking both of us to our graves. Or at least trying to." Grievous could make even a chuckle sound cruel and threatening.

"It sounds like I failed your trial," Sanya said.

"On the contrary, I predicted you perfectly," said Grievous. "Your inaction aligns perfectly with the confusion and uncertainty in your journal."

"I *knew* you were reading that," sighed Sanya.

"You are a nineteen year-old girl, lost and confused, able to see your Jedi Order for what it is but unable to come to the inevitable conclusion. I'm going to send you to someone who can help you. Come along, little one!" Grievous cackled now, a truly ominous sound.

Grievous led her through the halls of wherever she was, totally deserted but for them and the droids. They came to yet another nondescript hall, with a nondescript door at the end of it. They stopped there. "This is your last chance to return to your cell," Grievous said. "You may pray that one day you might return to the world you once knew. But if you step through this door, you will be forever sundered from that life. A future unknown awaits you."

Where did this brute learn such weighty words? Sanya wondered, staring at the door. She had nothing but her datapad and smock. The metal of the floor was cold on her bare feet. Whatever was on the other side of that door, she didn't know, and didn't care. Going back to that cell was an unbearable thought.

"I'll do it," Sanya said, a tremor in her voice. "I'll take my chances with the future."

"That's the bravest thing you've done since I caught you," said Grievous. He opened the door, and pushed her through. "Go now, learn what your heart already knows."

The door closed behind her. Sanya was in another bare metal room, but she wasn't alone. A very tall, pale woman stood, in an ostentatious red and gold dress. Her brown hair reached down to her legs, her long pointed ears poked out through it. "Hi!" she said, beaming bright enough to light up the room.

"Uh... hi," Sanya answered, looking up at her.

"I'm Lirka! Who are you?"

"Sanya," she said. This woman was a Sephi, that was obvious. The Sephi had joined the Separatists, of course. Sanya had known a Sephi in the service corps, a melancholy boy whose mind had never been on his work. One day he'd vanished. Sanya liked to think he'd gone home to help his people.

"I knew that already, the General told me your name when I got here," said Lirka. "But it'd be rude not to ask, right? I mean, the General's always short with everyone, so it's to be expected from him, but I've got standards for myself, you know? So anyways, I've got some clothes here for you, they should fit. Nothing too fancy, don't worry, but nothing that'll get you turned away from any establishment of good character. Oh good, your hair is already pretty short, that's something all the women do here. Are your ears pierced? Earrings are big in this place, you know. You're a Devaronian but you're near-Human so you shouldn't have a big problem out there. This city is pretty cosmopolitan, you know, I've never had a hard time. Oh dear, look at those nails! I know a Twi'lek girl, Faera, she'll get you fixed up right away. And you must want a shower! They've got a full body treatment at that salon, you know..."

The Sephi babbled on as she laid out Sanya's new clothes. Sanya, who'd been so isolated for all this time, was shocked into silence by the sheer barrage of words coming out Lirka's mouth. She'd stopped listening, and just enjoyed the sound of *sound*. Obediently, Sanya changed into her new clothes, the kind of close-fitting trousers, shirt, and jacket that made her line of field work utterly impractical. She felt like an alien in them, but anything was better than that nasty smock.

"...Oh, yes, perfect!" said Lirka, clapping. "You look amazing, dear! Those military droids are surprisingly great with a laser scanner, don't you think? Well, maybe not surprising. Now, let's head on down to that salon, the job's not over yet!"

"I've never been to a salon in my entire life," Sanya said, in a daze.

Lirka looked horrified. "You haven't!?"

"I was cleaning up nerve gas pretty recently," said Sanya. "No time for salons."

"Oh." Momentarily, the Sephi had been silenced. Only momentarily. "Well, no time like the present then, huh? Come on, come on, let's get you cleaned up! We're meeting a friend of mine tomorrow, let's impress her!"

"Where even are we?" asked Sanya, as she was pulled to yet another door.

"Raxulon, of course!" Lirka chirped. The door slid open, a blast of hot, humid air hit them, and they stepped into the bright light of a blue sky. Sanya could have cried. They stood in an alley between two buildings, speeders flew by in lanes above, she could hear voices of people on the street nearby.

Oh, it's beautiful, thought Sanya. *A Raxulon alleyway... What a refreshing sight after that prison! The feeling of cracked duracrete, the smell of garbage and exhaust, the taste of a million mysterious things in the air that I never want to know the origin of, this oppressive heat... I'd forgotten the world could be so full of sensation.*

"Alright," Lirka said, pulling her towards the street, "let's ditch this nasty alley! We're going uptown!" Right outside the alley, a big silver airspeeder was waiting. Lirka pushed her inside, and Sanya discovered a level of luxury she'd never imagined. She could only think to herself: *When Grievous said I would be 'forever sundered' from my old life, I didn't think he meant something like this...*

Summer was a pleasant time in Raxulon city, for a Neimoidian like Nute Gunray, former Viceroy of the Trade Federation, and now the humble Minister of Finance for the Confederacy of Independent Systems. It was a warm season, a slightly humid season, and while the sun could have been hidden behind a few more rain clouds, it reminded him of home. The air conditioning had broken down weeks ago, to the displeasure of the Humans, but for him, the heat reminded him of his first corporate job, days spent as a low-tier flunkie slaving away in an obscure records department too unimportant for air conditioning. The whole experience was too nostalgic for Gunray to complain about it. He didn't have much to complain about these days.

The young Human girl in front of him *did*, though. Captain Esera Komara of Naval Intelligence was back in his office once again. Despite her diminutive stature, this girl had fire in her veins. Possibly literally, given how she was sweating.

"...a whole month, until we finally got approval to slice another bow off a condemned *Recusant* that *no one* was doing anything with, just because they wouldn't take cash! Three days to weld it all together. Three weeks to patch in the primary systems. And a bad conduit blowing a week's worth of work into space? That takes three seconds. I've never heard Voyan swear like that, at least not since the black hole incident!"

Gunray sat there as this small woman ranted away, trying not to move. *Maybe she'll leave me alone if I look dead,* he thought. *I don't even know who this 'Voyan' is...*

"Now, I told Voyan this was a perfect opportunity to reflect on the impermanence of the material, but he called that a bunch of Jedi hogwash. What's a hog? Why does it wash? I don't know!"

There must be more to life than this, thought Gunray, as a little fly buzzed around the office above them. The electric oscillating fan in the corner competed with it for background noise. Outside, coming through the open window, were the sounds of the sleepy city below, mostly driven indoors by the heat at this time of the afternoon. *Now I know how my bosses felt at that records department, whenever I tried to tell them how poorly everything was organized. Just leave me alone, kid, it's too hot to do anything but sit back and relax.*

"And why is it so hot in here? I'm going to melt alive. Are you even listening?" asked Komara.

"No," said Gunray. "I don't know who these people are or what it has to do with the Ministry of Finance."

"I'm just trying to give you some context," said Komara, scowling at him. "*This* is why I want your ministry to pay for all repairs to my department's ships in advance. I can cover everything, I swear. It's not my fault the bank refused to deposit my credits because they looked suspicious."

"Captain, where did you even get this money?" Gunray asked, in a tired voice, as he tapped the datapad displaying the nine digit sum sitting in the safe of the warship in orbit.

"I, uh, confiscated it from an enemy of the state."

Gunray just gave her a flat stare.

"Okay, fine." Komara leaned in over the desk, lowering her voice. "I shot this Nautolan drug dealer the Jabiimis put a contract on and that was how much he had in his safe, in hard cash."

Hearing that, Gunray liked the girl a little more. She was a conniving little critter. "Quite bluntly, Captain, you don't know the first thing about finance, personal or otherwise. The financial institution you have an account with, one *West Raxulon Community Credit Union*, has less than one tenth of your current wealth in *liabilities,* not liquid assets. That's before we take in the income you're receiving from the Stark Sector operations and your salary, which is still the highest for your rank in the entire fleet, I might add."

"Liquid assets?" asked Komara, utterly puzzled. "Like... juice factories or something?"

Gunray buried his face in his hands. The ignorance of this child was enough to make him weep. But he was saved by the beeping of her communicator.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Komara!" barked a rough, raspy, mechanical voice that Gunray hadn't heard in months.

"Grievous," said Komara. Yes, there he was, the insane cyborg himself, in miniature hologram form, right on Gunray's desk.

"Get to Raxus right away, I need you to pick someone up," said Grievous.

"I'm in Raxulon right now," she told him. "You'll never guess who I'm with. Viceroy Gunray, from the failed Naboo invasion!"

"I *didn't* fail!" Gunray protested.

The cyborg's hologram turned around, as Gunray entered the projection range of the device. "Why are you associating with this slime, Komara?" Grievous asked.

"Because no one will take my cash, and no one will let me deposit it so I can pay with checks," she said. "I was hoping the Ministry of Finance could help me."

"General! This girl doesn't know what liquidity is!" said Gunray. "How could you leave her so ignorant?"

"Liquidity?" Grievous scoffed. "That's just wet stuff! Idiot!"

"That's exactly what I thought. Juice factories."

Between the two of them, Gunray thought, *this galaxy has no future of fiscal responsibility. Subprime loans will be the only winners of this war. Maybe it's time to get into banking...*

"Your drug money will have to wait, Komara," Grievous said. "Those Sephi sisters you like so much have an appointment with the Grand Prince tomorrow, with a person of interest. I expect you to be there. I'll send you her file once you've met."

"I was already going to be there, actually, the royal household has offered their services in tailoring to my crew," said Komara.

Grievous snorted. "Bah! When I was your age, I sewed all my own clothes! I await your report tomorrow." The transmission went dead.

"I cannot imagine that thing sewing," Gunray muttered.

"Yeah, me neither," agreed Komara. "So, uh, can you guys just pay for my future starship repair bills, then I hand you some ingots?"

"No," said Gunray, thinking of a dozen violations of ethics codes off the top of his head.

"Come on!"

For two months now, a strange alliance of the peace party and anti-centralists had run an insurrection in the Senate against Tarkin. Bail Organa and the Kuatis found unexpected common ground in their opposition to the immense powers the Supreme Chancellor had acquired throughout the war. Four bills had come to the Senate floor, and four times they'd been defeated, but by a slimmer margin each time.

The more compromises and concessions they include, the more senators they'll gain. Reassigning military control to the local governments would be terrible. It'd be the end of the organized war effort! No, that'd never happen, not while the Republic had victory within its grasp. He'd bribe, extort, threaten, and promise his way to legally defeating these bills as best he could. And if they ever passed, he had executive orders ready for that too.

He stared at the map of the front lines, more or less frozen since the battle of Agamar ended in an ignominious Loyalist withdrawal. For the Separatists, it was a clear-cut victory. For the Agamarians, it was the hollowest of victories, and a disaster that would cast its shadow for centuries to come. Four fifths of the entire male population between eighteen and forty-five were dead, three quarters of their prime agricultural land had been devastated, much of the most fertile soil in the sector had been contaminated with deadly toxins that could only be destroyed by sterilizing the earth. orchards that had stood for a thousand years had burnt to the ground in days. There were strains of fruit unique to certain orchards, that grew only in those specific environmental conditions, and now they were lost forever. The botanists of the Galaxy wept for the biological heritage of Agamar that had been utterly destroyed.

Tarkin couldn't have cared less. *They did it to themselves, to deny us their world, and in the end we left it. When we return, we'll finish the job!*

"But what are you going to do next, Grievous?" Tarkin asked to the map. "You've been silent for far too long. You must do *something*. These senators are losing their fear of you. You don't want that, do you?"

At least this respite was letting the Republic build up its merchant fleet again, and escorts, too. The losses in capital from the second battle of Kashyyyk had yet to be even partially replaced, but now the Republic Navy had thousands of new frigates to defend its freighters and tankers. Day by day, they crept closer to restoring operational mobility to all oversector fleets.

Something else was creeping closer to completion. With a lull in the fighting, Tarkin had directed more raw materials to Krennic and his construction program. The date of operational status was still very far off, but it was closer now than it'd been before, and not just because the calendar was moving ahead. Krennic's projected eighteen years had shrunk to seven in just two months. The more resources Tarkin funneled to the Ultimate Weapon, the closer that date came. It was a feeling that made his spine tingle.

A day in Raxulon had Sanya feeling like a new woman. She was clean, she was well-dressed, and most importantly, she got food that wasn't nutrient paste. Lirka and her twin sister, Sirka, had taken her in for the night, and were much excited about the next day's meeting. The two of them took Sanya to a sprawling palace, where the Grand Prince of Raxus dwelt. They weren't going to see the Grand Prince specifically, though.

"Who, then?" asked Sanya.

"You'll see," Sirka said. The Sephi twins giggled to each other.

The opulence of the palace was a shock to a woman raised in the austerity of the Jedi Temple and who had spent her formative years in rural communities across the Galaxy. The polished marble and gilt scrollwork, the statues and the paintings, the luxurious furniture, it was all a lot to take in. Sanya did a double-take when seeing the ancient emblem of the Sith Empire sitting above the Grand Prince's coat of arms; the royals of Raxus had not forgotten their distant ancestors.

Seeing herself in the mirror was a shock, too. The Sephi twins had built her a small wardrobe of well-made, reasonably fashionable, but not at all impractical for daily life clothes. She'd refused to let them put her in skirts, pants were good enough for her. But she had to admit, the Sephis knew what they were doing. The white of her trousers and jacket contrasted with both her off-red skin and the black shirt she wore, which matched her hair and eyes too. A Jedi was supposed to be humble and above worldly things, but Sanya liked looking like she didn't crawl out of a muddy field for once. *I wish these Sephi were a little shorter, though*, Sanya thought. She looked like a child next to them.

The very ceremonial palace guards escorted them to a room, some kind of lounge, where the person they were here to meet was waiting, as well as the planet's sovereign. A guard announced: "Your highness, Lady Komara, we present Lirka and Sirka of the house of Vantiales of Thustra." He paused, looked at his datapad, and added: "And Sanya, a Devaronian."

Sanya was about to give him a piece of her mind for that, when the name rang a bell in her mind. *Komara...* The realization nearly knocked the wind out of her. Kenobi had said she was working for Grievous! *Could it be?* From a sofa facing away from the door, Lady Komara rose.

The two of them stared at each other, faces puzzled. They knew each other's names, but their appearances were unrecognizable. The last time Sanya had seen Esera Komara, she'd been a skinny eleven year-old girl, a shy and timid little thing hiding behind her own long hair. The Lady Komara before her was none of those things, now. She was a few centimeters taller, and more than a few kilograms heavier. Her hair was trimmed as short as Raxian women liked it, her eyes shadowed in their fashion; she wore the jewelry of a noble lady and a dress to match. Puberty had done a lot more for her than it had for Sanya, too. While she didn't have the hourglass shape so championed by the great fashion houses of Humanity, she did have ample curves below her waist, giving her a voluptuous, if stocky, look. But the biggest change of all was in her demeanor. Lady Komara stood straight up, shoulders back, head held high. This was not a girl who hid, this was a woman of power and confidence. Of course, that made the look of bewilderment on her face even more incongruous. Sanya was sure she looked just as silly gaping at Lady Komara like that.

"Ah, this must be the girl the good General told me about," said the other person in the room. The Grand Prince of Raxus, Sanya knew, because she'd seen his portrait in the hall. He was a plump, jolly-looking, elderly gentleman, with a well-trimmed beard and big white mustache; no one would have believed his ancestors had brought the Republic and the Jedi to their knees only a thousand years ago. He and Lady Komara had been having lunch together. *Esera Komara, eating lunch with the descendant of Sith warriors,* thought Sanya, in a daze.

"Sanya?" Lady Komara asked. "Sanya, from the Temple?" Even her Coruscanti accent had warped into a Raxian one.

Sanya gave her a casual wave. "Hey, Esera."

"Uh, hey. Haven't seen you in a while. So... uh... what are you doing here?"

She could dress like and speak like a Raxian noble all she liked, one thing about her hadn't changed: Esera Komara remained an awkward, bumbling buffoon when it came to being social. "That's it?" Sanya asked, spreading her arms but giving what she hoped was a friendly smile. "Seven years and that's the first thing you ask?"

"Oh, um, sorry, I- I didn't, uh..." Esera's face had turned bright red. *Yeah, this definitely hasn't changed,* thought Sanya, trying not to laugh. Sanya never would have called Esera a friend, back in those days, but right now, seeing a familiar face after everything she had been through took a mountain of stress off her shoulders.

"I can see you two have quite a bit to discuss, quite a bit, I say!" said the Grand Prince, smiling happily. "It warms this old heart to see two friends reunited in these dark days. I'll take my leave now, Lady Komara. My household tailors will have those uniforms ready in no time, I guarantee it."

"Thank you, your highness," said Esera, with a graceful curtsy worthy of the royal court.

Did I just see that? Sanya wondered. The Grand Prince made his exit, and Lirka pushed Sanya over to bow as he passed. With the royalty gone, the two women faced each other again.

"Seven years," said Esera, shaking her head. "I can't believe it's only been seven years. It feels like a lifetime ago when you left for the agri-corps. How did you even get here, Sanya?"

"Yeah, it really does," Sanya agreed. "As to how I got here... Well, to keep it short, I was just minding my own business on Agamar, when out of nowhere your buddy Grievous swoops in and snatches me up. I spent like two months in solitary confinement doing these weird tests, and next thing I know, I'm here, with these two Sephi taking care of me. Honestly, I don't think it's all hit me yet, I'm surprised I haven't had a breakdown. So, how's it been for you?"

"It's been..." Esera fidgeted and looked away, body language totally at odds with her present appearance. Sanya wondered if the odd twitch in her right hand was fidgeting or not. Her fingers curled strangely while at rest, and they twitched randomly. "It's been a journey, I'll say that. I know what it's like, though, getting caught up by Grievous. That cranky old cyborg has no off switch. Well, he does literally have an off-switch, it's how he didn't get fried during the coup attempt, but that's another story."

Cranky old cyborg? That's *what Grievous is to her?* Awkward young woman or not, Esera had achieved something remarkable. "That's great," said Sanya. "So, why did Grievous dump me on these two kind and beautiful ladies? Surely not just for the pleasure of their company."

The Sephi girls giggled in unison again. "You always bring around such charming friends, Esera," Lirka said. "First that adorable little engineer boyfriend you went to Zeltros with, and now this smooth-talker!"

"Hold up, *boyfriend? Zeltros?*" Sanya looked from the Sephi to Esera and back again. Never in a million years would she think Esera had it in her-

"He's *not* my boyfriend," huffed Esera, face turning yet a deeper shade of red. "I had a diplomatic mission to Zeltros and Lieutenant Voyan had been there many times when he was younger. As to why you're here, Sanya, I have a few ideas. Maybe..." She looked thoughtful. "Maybe he thinks I wanted another lost Jedi to babysit."

"...Another?" asked Sanya.

"Oh, right. Do you remember Zule Xiss?"

"That mean Zeltron girl who used to pick on us? Yeah. Heard she died on Jabiim, good riddance as far as I'm concerned," Sanya said. Esera took on a strained expression.

"Yeah, about that... She was only dead for seventeen minutes. The Jabiimis tried to brainwash her into an assassin, it actually half-worked. She's been working on my ship for the past few months."

"Oh." Sanya sat down in one of the room's plush chairs. "I think the absurdity of this situation is starting to hit me, Esera."

"Welcome to my life," she said.

The four of them ended up at a high-end restaurant, where Esera had a second lunch. *Well, I shouldn't be surprised she's so curvy now,* Sanya thought. The Human girl devoured everything on her plate within five minutes, leaving not a crumb, just like Sanya had seen the soldiers of both sides on Agamar do. "*Never* turn down free food," Esera told her. "That's the second thing I learned about war. The first was that war sucks."

"Hah, yeah, you can say that again," said Sanya. She tried to laugh, but just ended up sighing. Going from the charred wasteland of Laudiun to the solitary monotony and moments of terror in Grievous's dungeons to the splendid glamour of Raxulon city where one wouldn't have even guessed there was a war... Sanya was tired, the kind of tired sleep didn't fix. *Free food is nice, at least... Thanks Lirka and Sirka.*

After eating, in the privacy of their sound-shielded booth, Esera told Sanya everything that had happened to her since they parted ways. Sometimes, she'd start talking about something, but suddenly stop, and change the subject completely. And she said surprisingly little about her master. Olor Callo was dead, Sanya knew that, but what little Esera said about him was only good.

So that's how she transformed, thought Sanya. *One part Olor Callo, one part Grievous. You couldn't ask for two more different mentors.* And Grievous *was* a mentor to Esera; she didn't say it, but the way she spoke of him made that clear. Not the patient, fatherly mentor Master Callo seemed to have been for her, who'd given her enough courage and conviction to begin walking this path, but a stern, intimidating mentor, who'd forced her to become the woman she needed to be. What Esera had done was truly absurd. If Sanya had read her story in a book, she'd think it contrived and unrealistic. But reality was a very strange place to live.

"And that's how I ended up here," Esera said, half an hour after they'd been served their food. "So, what about you?"

"Me? Nothing nearly as amazing as that," said Sanya. "Go to this planet, help out farmers. Go to that planet, clean up a chemical spill. War starts, more of the same. I finally got dumped on Agamar about seven- uh, nine now, I think, months ago. It was pretty much non-stop firefighting and nerve-gas scrubbing. Oh yeah, body collection and disposal too. Kalani would send the Agamarians into our lines until we were low on ammo, *then* he'd release the droids. Cleaning up the battlefields was something else, let me tell you." The grim look on Esera's face said it all.

"You don't need to," she said. "I've seen it too."

Sanya leaned back and sighed, trying to hide the dark mood that kept threatening to overtake her. "Rough galaxy out there, isn't it? Well, long story short, Grievous's counter-attack surprised me. I tried getting back to the front, but he caught me."

"Grievous personally chased you down?" asked Esera. Skepticism was written on her face.

"Okay, no," Sanya said. "Kenobi was there, asking me about *you!* Grievous chased him and caught me instead."

"I'm surprised he even found out you existed. Usually Jedi masters forget the Service Corps is a thing," Esera said. "What doesn't surprise me is that you ended up here."

"Oh?"

"If Zule Xiss came back from the dead just to insult me and challenge me to a fight, then surely, my best friend from when I was little is here for a reason, right?" asked Esera, with a hopeful smile.

Sanya tried to smile back. *Ah, right, she still thinks we were friends.* But as she reflected on her circumstances, perhaps it was best to let her keep thinking that. *This girl might be my one ticket out of here, and back to...*

Her line of thought stopped dead.

Back to what?

Sanya was alone, deep in enemy territory, living entirely at the mercy of the Separatists. For reasons unknown to her, Grievous had dumped her on a young woman who'd once been a tag-along acquaintance a decade ago. Going *back* meant returning to the Jedi Service Corps, descending into the next nightmare hellscape or some utterly dull backwater. And that's all her life would ever be, with no hope of ever aspiring to anything more, until she died or she asked the Council of Reassignment for a transfer to another branch of the Corps. A lifetime of menial tasks stretched ahead of her. *And it's all because I didn't make the cut to become a padawan learner,* Sanya thought.

Her audience could tell she was in deep thought. The Sephis were concerned but quiet, while Esera looked sympathetic. When they made eye contact, she spoke. "I know what you're thinking, Sanya," she said. "You're standing at a crossroads between a safe choice that will lead you nowhere, and a dangerous choice that will lead you somewhere. It *is* dangerous, and scary, but it is *some*where. Grievous must know this too, that's why he sent you to me."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" asked Sanya. "What makes you think I'm going to turn traitor and join you?"

"Who said anything about treason? But that does prove I'm right." Esera folded her hands on the table. "Six months ago I had a choice. I could go back to the Republic and be executed for treason. I could walk away from this disgusting war and hide on the sidelines until it ended, if it ever did end. Or... I could try to make a difference. On this side."

"Hey, I didn't betray anyone," Sanya said. "If I go back they're going to debrief me and give me a pat on the back for surviving it all, then send me straight back to work. Maybe that's what I want."

Esera gave her a flat stare. "You and I both know you've had it with that life. I can feel how frustrated and conflicted you are. You're not alone." She reached across the table, now looking hopeful, and put a hand on Sanya's. "Come with me, it'll be just like the old days, except this time, we're not powerless. We're not victims. We can make a difference out there, together!"

One last time, Sanya thought about going back to the Jedi. *If I have to stumble through the wreckage of a planet while a Council master lectures me about the justness of this war even one more time in my life, I'm going to shoot myself,* she thought. "Fine," Sanya sighed. "I'm in. Three warm meals a day is better than what I've been getting for the past few years."

Now, Esera grinned. "I knew you'd make the right choice."

"...And that's how she joined me," said Komara's hologram.

Grievous nodded. "Just as I predicted," he said.

"Why didn't you kill her on Agamar, Grievous?" asked the girl. "She's a Jedi. Not a fighting Jedi, like I was, but still one of us. Them. You know what I mean."

"There is no sport in killing an unarmed Jedi," Grievous told her. "And since she didn't even have a lightsaber to start with, killing her made no sense."

"Oh, are you actually rethinking your grudge against the entire Order?" Komara asked, raising an eyebrow. "I *did* win a fight on my own, back before Zeltros. I'm still expecting it."

"Don't be ridiculous," Grievous said. He jabbed a finger at her hologram "You both serve my purposes against the Jedi. I have turned two of its members against it, now."

"You had nothing to do with our choices, Major Malevolent," said Komara, arms crossed and a scowl on her face. Anger did suit her much better than fear, even if it made her more annoying.

"Don't ever call me that ever again," he told her.

"Okay, Admiral Awful."

Feisty today, aren't we? Grievous wondered what he could do to punish her. *Aha!* "How is your investigation into Sidious going, Komara? Surely you haven't forgotten that."

"Uh..." On the defensive, the girl lost her petulance. "I'll get back on that. It's been really busy lately."

"By *that* you mean the identification of our chief enemy," said Grievous. "Get to it!"

He cut the line before she could answer. The issue of Sidious had been looming larger on Grievous's mind, lately. He looked out into space from his tower dwelling, eyes searching the stars, but for what, not even he knew. *It was not by chance the Devaronian came my way,* thought Grievous. *She'll have a part to play yet. But what?* The gods worked in mysterious ways. Setting aside his grudge to turn the enemy against themselves was something he could stomach. Either way, he was getting his revenge, and that was all he cared for. As long as the Jedi were destroyed, Grievous would fulfill the will of the gods, whatever it was.

But until that day, Grievous had more mundane matters to attend to.

"We've found it, General," Ricimer Eemon reported via hologram. "Captain Hatha's aborted raid on Fondor has drawn off Republic forces from Bestine IV. It's not the biggest target, but if you moved *right now* you could get in there and cause some real damage-"

Grievous had opened a line to a certain ship in the fleet even before he'd finished shutting off Eemon's transmission. "Kronaak, get your division ready, I have a mission for you."

Sanya was soon aboard *Encounter,* a *Recusant* -class destroyer that had seen far better days. The ceilings were low, the halls were dark, and the signs of fixed battle damage were everywhere. And it was chilly. Not freezing, but noticeably cooler than Republic standard life support settings. Jackets and sweaters would be daily wear aboard this ship, Sanya knew.

All Sanya's belongings in the Galaxy were in a little bag; a week's worth of everyday clothes, plus something a little more formal, and the datapad that had become her diary. Soon she'd have a uniform, said Esera, as she had access to the Grand Prince's very own tailors. Esera was very excited about that, it was very un-Jedi-like of her.

The ship's crew, if they could be called that, gathered in the mess hall to meet the new girl. They were an odd bunch, there could be no doubt. Esera had changed into her work clothes, looking more like the chairwoman of a prestigious investment banking firm than a military starship captain. That this girl was eighteen years old seemed unbelievable, Sanya would have thought her in her twenties, at least until she opened her mouth and revealed how awkward she could be.

"This is Sanya, everyone," Esera told the four others, plus one astromech droid. "We were friends at the Jedi Temple, a long time ago. She was in the agri-corps, though, she wasn't a knight like I was. Not that there's anything wrong with the agri-corps, they do important work, but they get looked over a lot, so maybe you didn't know-"

Just stop talking, Sanya thought, as Esera dug herself deeper into a self-made hole. She took the initiative. "I wasn't a farmer," Sanya said, raising her hands. "But I know a lot about plants. If you're wondering why I came all the way here just to grace you with my presence, you can blame your captain's boss."

"Grievous has assigned her to me for the time being," Esera told them. "Hopefully she'll find a niche on this ship." Then the introductions of the crew began.

Two large figures had caught Sanya's eye when she walked in. One was the Skakoan, who she learned was Harak Murshida of the Skako Cyber-Guard, the ship's acting doctor and learned mystic. He was well over two meters tall, almost as big as Grievous. His silver armor glinted beneath a red hooded robe, making him look like a dazzling version of an ancient Jedi warrior; the green-glowing goggles he wore only added to the mystique. What a Cyber-Guard was, Sanya could not say, but the gentle whine of servos as he moved hinted at the power he possessed. "Well met, Sanya," said Murshida. "I hope you will join the Captain and I in our quest for understanding the universe."

"Uh, maybe," said Sanya.

The other large one was Alize, the Zygerrian cook, a huge woman who was composed of the colors of lavender, a Corellian flower that came in several shades of purple. She was a full two heads taller than Sanya, and her girth was as unrivaled as her chest size aboard this ship. No doubt, Alize was the most huggable woman among them all. *She's not Orn Free Taa sized,* thought Sanya, *but she's in the neighborhood.* Everything about Alize was big, even her arms were probably as thick as Sanya's waist. Perhaps it was her Zygerrian features, clawed fingers and sharp tufted ears, but there was a distinctly predatory look to the woman, no matter how big and round she was. "I can't believe we've got three of these Jedi now," Alize said, her voice deep and soft. "Esera, my dear, I wish you'd been honest from the start. I would have known what I was getting into."

Esera blushed and looked away. Sanya took the stand: "Don't worry about it," she said. "I doubt you'll find me as crazy as these two. They actually let us live lives in the Service Corps."

Then there were the other two, much closer to her age than the Zygerrian or the Skakoan. For once, Sanya wasn't the only red-colored woman in the room; while her skin's shade of red tended more towards pink, Zule Xiss the Zeltron had more of an orange tinge. Her brown hair was an oddity for her species, but it didn't clash with her appearance. Zule was tall and sleek, with all the attractive features inherent to a woman of her race. Sanya couldn't help but furtively look her up and down. Her high cheekbones and perfectly pointed chin would have been the envy of any model, as would her slim hourglass figure and slender thighs. The only thing unconventional about her was her broad shoulders and hard physique; Zule's muscles were obvious even under her clothes when she was at rest, though one of her arms had been replaced by a mechanical prosthetic. She sat with her long legs crossed, leaning back in her chair, looking at Sanya with skeptical confusion. *I've never seen a Zeltron so conservatively dressed,* thought Sanya, *though she was a full-on Jedi, that's probably got something to do with it...*

"Sanya, was it?" Zule asked. "Why does that name sound familiar?"

"You thrashed Esera and I in the sparring ring multiple times," said Sanya, giving her a tired glare. "You're probably the reason I never got picked by any master for further training."

"Oh," said Zule. Her eyes darted away. *More like Esera than I would have thought...*

And finally, there was the other Human. Lieutenant Miha Voyan, Esera's most vexing–and only formal–subordinate, chief engineer and second in command of *Encounter*. He was a far cry from Zule's beauty, but to be fair, so was Sanya, and most everyone else in the room; only Esera was even in the same stadium for that competition. Voyan was thin reed of a man, his hair a few shades darker than Zule's, his grey eyes set more deeply into his face and his nose a little more prominent than was average for a Human of his pale breed. Back on Coruscant, Sanya wouldn't have even noticed his existence. After a dry spell consisting of seven months on toxin-infused Agamar and two months in solitary confinement, he had the appeal of simply being a young-ish male within twenty meters of her. Voyan sat beside Xiss, though. Perhaps the Zeltron had already gotten to him?

Well, she is a Zeltron, she should be more than willing to share if we all want to blow off some steam... Sanya had done more risque things than that with other young, bored members of the Service Corps on distant, boring planets. That may have been the one advantage of the Service Corps over the Order proper: no one cared what they got up to on their own time, since a Service Corps member turning to the dark side was about as dangerous as a toddler throwing a tantrum.

Also present was the astromech droid, R8-M5, a green and white little fellow who'd developed enough of a personality to act bored of the whole organic meeting. He beeped and chirped a salute, and then plugged into a charging port that looked suspiciously out of place in the mess hall. Perhaps it'd been installed just so the droid wouldn't be alone?

"What's your experience with hydroponics?" asked Voyan.

"Uh, I've done some work on them. More academic than practical," Sanya said.

"Murshida's complained his vegetable juices don't taste quite right, but hydroponics is out of my league. The Captain's Carammite gourds also are being difficult. I'll get you to work on those once you're settled in," Voyan told her, tapping something into his datapad. "Captain Komara, I'd like to add Sanya to the crew register, then put up a notice for more crew in Raxulon."

"This guy never stops thinking about work," Esera told Sanya, before she faced the lieutenant. "You've got my approval, Voyan. Just wait for the uniforms to come in before you start recruiting. We're professionals."

"'Professionals,'" Zule said, actually making quotation marks with her fingers.

They all ate together in the mess hall, and Sanya found herself quickly feeling at ease. There was no pretense with this lot. Despite the enmity of their youth, Zule Xiss was not a hard woman to get along with. She was far more laid back here than she had been as a kid at the Temple. Of all the Zeltrons Sanya had met in the Galaxy, Zule was definitely the least outgoing. Still, she looked like a regular social glowfly compared to Esera, who ate in total silence and didn't once interject into the conversation. In fact, Sanya's tiny bit of Force sensitivity picked up on some tension between Esera and the others. Sanya noted that once again, Esera was using her left hand for everything, not without some clumsiness. She quietly dismissed herself soon after. "I've got to get to work on a project for Grievous," Esera said. "Goodnight."

Then she was off, leaving Sanya in a room full of near strangers. "Okay, now that she's gone," Sanya said to the table, "what's up with her hand? When we were kids she was right handed, but now she does everything with her left hand. She uses that right hand like a crab claw that's been grafted onto her."

"Komara got her hand cut off a few months ago," Voyan said. "She had it re-attached but the nerves didn't heal back right. She's been learning to do everything with her left hand ever since."

"Ouch," Sanya said.

"The work of Ahsoka Tano, I heard," said Zule. *Oh, that hothead, that explains a lot.* That also meant Esera had been actively fighting other Jedi, something that didn't bode well for Sanya. The fact she'd *fought* Ahsoka Tano and only lost her hand was something Esera hadn't mentioned at all, earlier, and was just one more piece of evidence this woman was as much a stranger to Sanya as the rest of these people were.

"If I ever meet this Ahsoka girl, I'll teach her a lesson," Alize said, smashing a meaty fist into her other hand. "How could anyone do that to Esera? She's so sweet!"

Before today, I'd have called her whiny and clingy, Sanya thought.

"Sweet?" Zule rolled her eyes. "Yeah, that's one word for her. She's a sappy, bleeding-heart idealist with no sense of reality. I'm not surprised you two were friends, Sanya."

Yeah, that sounds more like the Esera I knew, thought Sanya. "About that..." Sanya cringed, and lowered her voice. "Look, I was, like, the only girl at the Temple who'd put up with her. We weren't that close, I didn't even really *like* her, but I was too nice to tell her to shove off. She obviously saw it differently."

"How awkward," Murshida said, sipping his vegetable juice through what looked like a miniaturized pressure chamber. The noise he made as he sipped only added to the awkwardness.

"Yeah, you think?" Sanya put her head in her hands. "I barely knew her back then, I've got no damn idea who this woman is now, and the only reason I'm here is because of her."

Alize frowned. "Does she know this?"

"Of course not!" Sanya said. "I'm not telling the woman who just saved my butt from one million years of Separatist jail 'oh actually I didn't like you that much when we were kids.' How ungrateful would that be?"

"Honey," said Alize, putting a big hand on Sanya's shoulder, "I always told my kids it's better to tell a hard truth once than keep up a lie forever. Come clean with her, and if you want to show gratitude, try to get to know her. For real, this time. She's really isolated herself for the past two months. We're worried."

"We are?" asked Zule, glancing around.

"Yes, we are!" said Alize, with a fiery glare. Sanya held her tongue; this was a deep insight into the social dynamics of *Encounter.*

"Komara's always been independent," said Voyan. "She has a hard time getting close to others."

"So, she's literally you, but a girl," Zule said. "Why are Humans like this? You get burned once and you decide that," she dropped her voice an octave, "'oh no people are mean I can never trust anyone ever again!'"

"Says the Zeltron who got brought back to life and hasn't stopped complaining about it ever since."

"Why you-!" Zule jumped up and got her arm around Voyan's neck. For a few startling seconds, Sanya thought they were about to be witness to a murder, but the total lack of reaction from Alize and Murshida stayed her hand. *Oh, Zule's just playing with him,* Sanya thought, watching the Zeltron girl pretend to strangle Voyan. *Yeah, I'm thinking they're together.*

"Don't mind the kids, Sanya," Alize told her. "You might not guess it but they get along very well. Most of the time."

"Yeah, I can believe it," said Sanya.

Before long, everyone had headed off to sleep, leaving the ship to the droids. Sanya stared at the ceiling of her new cabin. *What am I doing here?* she wondered. *Esera Komara steps into my life for the first time in seven years and she sweeps me up into... whatever the hell this place is. Grievous planned this, he surely did, but* why? *Why does he want me here? How do I not play into his game?*

Sleep wouldn't come, as was often the case for her in any new place. So, she wrote in her datapad, bugged or not. Sanya wrote down everything she'd felt today, especially her mixed feelings about Esera and this new beginning. *Hydroponics,* she wrote, *I'll be doing hydroponics here. For the Separatists! Is that why the Horrible Thing captured me? To grow* Carammite gourds *for Esera Komara as she and her band of misfits fly around in this garbage scow doing who knows what? Is this really what my life is? What am I going to do? This is so weird. How did I end up working for the scared little girl who used to follow me around... How can I work for her when she thinks I ever cared about her? She's clearly trying to help me because she thinks we were friends once... Why does it feel so dirty?* Sanya wrote until her eyes became too heavy to keep open, and at last, she fell into her bed and slipped away out of consciousness.

One *Lucrehulk* and six *Recusants* dropped out of hyperspace into orbit of Bestine IV. Getting there had been a journey. With Hutt Space closed, Kronaak had to cut through the remote, disputed, lawless area of the Expansion Region to the galactic south of Umbara, west of the Hutts, and east of the Republic. Incidentally, the minor hyperlanes through that space took his little fleet near Emberlene. The Emberleners hadn't missed this.

"This is Emberlene high command, please come in, Confederate naval vessel," the message had said, patchy and full of static.

"This is *Aethra*," Kronaak had responded. Emberlene was a minor regional power, its primary contribution to the war were a few thousand combat veteran officers to Grievous's strike force.

"We are in need of assistance, *Aethra*," the Emberlener voice had said. Audio-only.

"And we are on an urgent mission," he'd answered.

"Please relay to General Grievous that we need our people back on Emberlene. The war does not go well."

"We will relay, Emberlene. *Aethra* out."

That'd been the extent of their exchange. A day later, Kronaak and his flotilla arrived at Bestine IV. Kronaak thought it a pleasant-looking planet, great blue oceans littered with chains of lush islands.

"They've got us on scanners, sir," OOM-27 said.

"Launch all wings and send our lovely ladies forward," said Kronaak. "Those ships are laughable." He'd destroyed several with impunity at Kabal, many months ago, an action he liked to think inspired Grievous's plan to bleed the Republic's supplies dry before engaging it at Kashyyyk.

A swarm of Vulture droid fighters and Hyena droid bombers soon poured out of *Aethra*'s two hangars. Against that much firepower so dispersed, the Republic's light cruisers–frigates, really–had no chance. Seven hundred fighters and some four hundred bombers would crush anything in their path that wasn't a proper Star Destroyer. Lately, Kronaak had wondered if it'd be better to strip the *Lucrehulks* of heavy armaments and clear up more space for fighters and bombers inside the ships, but overhauling the *Lucrehulk* fleet like that would be time-consuming. Word was that the new *Oceana*-class would be modular, so perhaps Grievous would consider a carrier variant of that ship.

Eleven hundred ships fell upon the Republic cruisers out of spacedock. The Vulture droids could only strafe what was neither shielded nor armored, but the Hyena droids massacred the foe. A few meager Loyalist fighters came out to meet the swarm, but they were destroyed within seconds. *Overwhelming firepower,* thought Kronaak, *one of the most satisfying things there is.*

Not overwhelming enough, though. After ten minutes of wanton death and destruction, the fighters and bombers came back to re-arm. The droid-brained *Recusant*s were closing in on the station and shipyard complex, which had gone untouched. Deprived of the surely under-crewed and unready *Arquitens* flotilla awaiting commissioning, the orbital facility was defenseless. Kronaak sent them a message:

"Republic shipyard, surrender and evacuate immediately and your lives will be spared. You have two minutes to lower your shields, otherwise I will destroy you without mercy," he told them.

The facility's shields dropped immediately, and minutes later, the escape pods began to shoot out. They hadn't time to scuttle the unfinished ships or the yard, but Kronaak hadn't time to seize them either. The moment the last pod was away, Kronaak's escort ships annihilated the shipyard. All that remained was floating debris and cooled droplets of molten metal.

"The final tally of destroyed ships is seventy-eight, sir," OOM-27 reported. "Eleven finished, the rest in various states of construction."

That information was sent on to Grievous. By the numbers, it was a small victory, even meaningless in terms of ships destroyed. But the orbital facilities were completely wiped out. Anything that had been planned for building at Bestine IV would never see the light of the stars now. And that was no small victory.

It took a few days for Sanya to settle into her new life on *Encounter*. Miha Voyan was right, the hydroponics bay was in trouble. She had her work cut out for her, shifting soil acidity towards the plants' preferred level, replacing water lines filled with mineral precipitates, and treating a minor virus in a certain captain's batch of Carammite dwarf gourds. Droids didn't care for such things, it seemed to her. Sanya's initial unease was soon washed away by the dull comforts of routine work. Her hands had something to do, her mind had something to focus on, and while she was in the hydroponics bay, all her troubles seemed to fade away into silly little things not worth thinking about. There was no pressure to accelerate her schedule, no danger of being killed if her mask slipped off, no touchy locals who needed to be accommodated. In the hydroponics bay, Sanya was queen. She couldn't say she was happy, not yet, she was too alone for that, but there were no worries here. Not until they came to her, at least.

Zule Xiss made an appearance, starting the inevitable confrontation between them. "So," she said one day, leaning against the bulkhead of the bay. "You and I don't have a great past, do we?"

"Not really," said Sanya. She wasn't interested in a fight, and knew exactly how to handle this. "But we were kids. Neither you or I are the people we were eight years ago. I'm giving you a blank slate."

"Oh," said Zule. "Well, I was gonna say I'm not who I was a few years ago too."

"Relax, we're cool," Sanya said.

"Great."

An awkward silence passed, and Sanya thought the Zeltron defused enough to change the subject to something touchier. "Heard you got brainwashed by the Jabiimis."

"I did not!" huffed the Zeltron girl. "The ideology of the National Worker's Alliance has truly improved the lives of the common people on that planet. They're doing good work there."

"Yep, totally brainwashed." Sanya laughed. "I also heard you're in trouble with them. Something about a nerve staple if you go back. I don't even know what that is."

The silence from Zule was telling. She looked at the floor, angry, but also scared. Seeing such a physically strong woman afraid was a strange sight. In time, Zule found the words she looked for. "They had some kind of plan to make me their perfect assassin. Which I was alright with. But a lot of them didn't trust me. They wanted to plug this thing into my brain stem that'd... that'd basically make me a robot for them to command. The nerve staple. I've seen what that thing does to people. And the one guy who was keeping them from stapling me died on my first mission. If I go back to Jabiim... I'm just going to be a slave. I can't do that. I love Jabiim, I love the people, I want to be a part of what they're building, but... I can't."

Now, isn't that something to see, thought Sanya. *Zule Xiss, brainwashed assassin who still can't say no to freedom.* "It's the right call," Sanya told her. "You didn't have to explain everything to me, but this ship seems to be full of straight-shooters."

"Uh, no," said Zule. "I can only tell you this because Miha and I have talked about it so much. I've come to terms, I guess. Good luck getting Miha to be raw with you. Or Komara. No one can talk to her at all, let alone talk honestly. She's a ghost, we never see her around, except when there's food... Alize, Murshida, and I are the ones who will talk to you. The Humans? They keep their own counsel."

"That's... not optimal," sighed Sanya. "Look, Zule, you're a Zeltron so you'll understand, but I haven't shared a bed with anyone in nine months, if you get what I mean. I was hoping to find some companionship here."

Zule Xiss was truly the strangest Zeltron Sanya had ever met, because her cheeks became a darker shade of red, and her eyes went wide. "What? No, no, no, we don't do that kind of thing here," she stammered, shaking her head and raising her hands.

Sanya tilted her head. "Really? I was convinced you and Voyan were-"

"No!" Zule screeched. "No no no! It's *nothing* like that! Uh, he's not even, um, my type..."

"Am I your type?" asked Sanya, narrowing her eyes and smirking.

"No! You're a- well, you're a girl too, we can't..." Zule trailed off under Sanya's intense stare.

"Who says we can't?" Sanya asked her.

"Miha!" screamed Zule, as she fled the hydroponics bay. "Help me! I'm being *propositioned!*"

All Sanya could do was laugh. Zule was the anti-Zeltron in spirit. She was tall, strong, beautiful; Zule was what Sanya had once wished to be, before she'd found comfort in being just who she was. She had all of a Zeltron's empathic senses and pheromones, all of a Zeltron's attractive looks and physique, and yet... Even allusions to sexuality had literally sent her running and screaming. *So, the ship's resident Zeltron is repressed and can't handle her own natural instincts,* thought Sanya. *That's just great. I hope Voyan and Esera aren't as uptight...* She brought it up directly with the engineer.

"Oh, you actually *did* proposition Zule," Voyan said, as she followed him to the hangar. "I thought she was exaggerating. I won't call her a liar, but she's a Zeltron, it's in her nature to make things more exciting."

"How about you?" asked Sanya. "You get lonely around here?"

"Lonely is my lifestyle," said Voyan. "But I don't do casual flings. I'm flattered you'd ask, though."

"There's two men on this ship, you're the one not in a pressure suit."

"Now I'm not so flattered."

"Hey, you're not *bad* looking, you're just the only choice aboard right now."

"Don't worry about that, then, that's going to change soon." Voyan and she entered the hangar, where the two in question were, with Murshida, down on the floor. They'd moved everything to the sides, clearing an open space.

"What's going on?" Sanya asked the engineer.

"It's sparring night, where I get vicarious revenge through the Captain. Zule might beat me at pinball every game, but she never wins against the Captain."

Sanya's eyes at least got the treat of seeing Esera and Zule dressed down for athletics. *Wow, Esera, you've really grown up,* Sanya thought. Now in shorts and a shirt, both pleasingly tight on her, Sanya knew voluptuous had been the right word for her former acquaintance's matured physique. Below chest level, at least. But could she really beat Zule in sparring? Stocky had also been a correct word to describe Esera; her arms and legs were shorter than Zule's in proportion, and definitely in overall length. Zule's remaining organic bicep flexed as she warmed up, her bare abs contracted and expanded with each stretch. Repressed as she might have been, Zule had no qualms about showing skin. Sanya enjoyed the show from the hangar catwalk. *You're looking even better than Esera, Zule,* she thought. *Sorry, Esera.*

"You know, I bet you're just here to watch two girls get hot and sweaty with each other," Sanya said to Voyan, giving him a smirk. Voyan snorted.

"Please, there's much better content like that on the shadowfeeds," he said. "I'm here purely to see Zule knocked down a peg. She really needs it every few days. Zeltron egos are like that."

"You really think Esera can win?" asked Sanya. "I mean, look at her, those aren't the kind of curves you get from working out."

Voyan's mouth twitched up in a smile. "You're forgetting, she's Stalimurian."

"What's that mean?" Sanya had never heard of that planet.

"Watch."

Murshida walked them each to their side of the cleared area, behind a line of tape on the deck. He returned to the middle, and banged his vibro-weapon staff down. "Begin!" he shouted. The lightsabers went on, both green.

"Don't even think about a blind rush," said Esera.

"I'm over that," Zule growled, beginning to circle around towards Esera. There was some *real* hostility between the two young women, mostly from Zule. But Esera did not look friendly at that moment. Sanya wondered if Murshida had ever had to intervene between them.

"Prove it," Esera said.

Zule darted in, fast, but Esera stepped out of her way even faster. The Zeltron slid on the hangar deck, but she was already twisting around to keep her blade facing her opponent. Esera held her right hand behind her back, and she moved smoothly, with grace. *Form two,* thought Sanya, remembering her childhood lightsaber lessons. Esera had hated them, especially form two, which existed purely for lightsaber combat purposes. Now here she was, using it like... not quite a master, or even a student of a master, but as the student of someone who had learned from a master. *Grievous taught her,* Sanya realized it.

Zule's attacks were heavy, powerful; but that didn't matter when Esera refused to be hit. She let the Zeltron flail around, getting angrier and angrier, until she finally slipped up. Esera tripped her, and had her lightsaber at Zule's throat. Then, she and Murshida critiqued Zule's performance in more detail, step by step.

"What did I say?" asked Voyan.

"I'm impressed. I didn't think she could do it. Mentally or physically." Sanya leaned on the catwalk railing. "Stalimurian, huh?"

"It's a cold planet, barely habitable by baseline Human standards. But the Stalimurians have called it home for over a thousand generations. Their genome is distinct even from their neighbors. They're short, in height and limb, and they're wide, to maximize volume over surface area. You may have noticed the Captain's appetite; burning calories keeps the metabolic rate up, and therefore, body heat. They build body fat quickly, for insulation, and they're built to handle it. The Captain's all the proof you need of that, look at how she moves. They're an exceptionally well-adapted people... to Stalimur, at least."

"That explains a lot," said Sanya. On the hangar deck, Zule and Esera were at it again, but that wasn't as interesting as this conversation was. "So, Esera's as much the athlete as Zule, despite being a little soft around the edges. She's fast, I can't deny that," Just as Sanya said that, Esera caught Zule off-balance, and kicked her square in the chest, sending the Zeltron sprawling. Something told her that move came from Grievous, that was no form two lightsaber attack.

"That's her people's biology," Voyan said. "I've known this for a while now, but she's totally clueless. I wonder when she'll notice she's not like me, or the Carammites we've met, or the Stark family..."

"I didn't even know there were Humans varieties beyond shades of skin," Sanya said.

"You find them here and there, little pockets of isolated populations, almost always low-tech residents of extreme environments, who have been there since the dawn of space travel. Like Stalimur. You've noticed how cold this ship is, right?"

"Yeah!"

"That was the Captain. This ship used to be set to twenty-three degrees, Gossam standard. Now it's at fourteen, by her order. The captain wears long sleeves, long dresses, lots of layers, but despite being cold she's never once complained about it. That's what really got me curious. I did some digging and learned the rest. I don't think she's ever noticed any of it."

"You sure are interested in Esera," Sanya said, giving him a sly look. "Watching her spar, reading up on her people's genetics, observing her dressing habits... I thought you and Zule were a thing, but maybe your eyes are somewhere else."

Voyan rolled those eyes. "You've never been curious about your superior officer acting strangely? It's a great relief to me, as second in command of this ship, that our Captain is in fact acting perfectly rational for a woman of her race."

"You really care about her, don't you?" Sanya asked. Her goal was to tease the lieutenant, but Voyan shot straight past the bait.

"Of course I do," he said. "I owe her my life, several times over. She's done a lot for me, it's the least I can do to watch out for her. Reciprocality, Sanya. Even if watching out for her is becoming increasingly difficult, since she avoids the rest of us."

"Why's that? She seems more or less fine to me, just a little shy. She's always been shy."

"Who knows? I don't. She's avoiding us, like I said. And that's on top of being a difficult woman to approach, being *Grievous's* prize pupil and having a temper hotter than Ibisa in summer."

Sanya felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. She knew what she had to do now, she just didn't want to do it. "Well... I don't know Esera. I didn't know her at the Temple, I've got no idea who this woman is now. But we have a history, maybe I can use that to see if she needs help."

"I'd appreciate that," said Voyan.

"You can't be serious," said Tarkin, looking at the holovid footage of a single Separatist battleship and its attack craft annihilating over seventy light cruisers in various states of functionality.

"I'm afraid it's real," Director Orlok of Republic Intelligence said.

"What garbage are the Kuatis selling us?"

"The *Arquitens* is undergunned, unarmored, and its fighter wing is so small it might as well be useless against anything except lone pirate skiffs," Orlok said. "We've known this for over a year now, but the Kuati lobby is strong."

Tarkin began tapping away at a datapad. "This is going to be an executive order to stop production on those ships immediately. Any such cruiser not at least eighty percent complete will be scrapped on the ways, the rest will be pulled back to third-line duties. Maybe someone can make armed transports out of them."

"Very good, my lord," said Orlok. "But the loss of seventy seven mostly unfinished cruisers isn't major, we have thousands and thousands under construction."

"And all of them useless for their mission: escort duty." Tarkin opened the line to his secretary. "Get me the head of Kuat Drive Yards. No, I don't care what time it is over there."

Orlok made a half-smile beneath his bushy mustache. "What have you got in mind?"

"Anything but those ghastly things," said Tarkin, waiting on the call to patch through. A sleepy, middle-aged woman appeared, hair hastily combed. Onara Kuat; Tarkin recognized her from several prior encounters at formal occasions. He'd caught her without a hat on, for once.

"Chancellor," she yawned, "to what do I owe the pleasure at this... *early* hour?"

Tarkin sent her the losses from Bestine IV. "Seventy-seven of your cruisers destroyed in minutes by a single rebel battleship. This is unacceptable."

"My lord," Kuat said, blinking at the list, "nine in ten of these ships weren't even finished."

"I want escort craft for the supply lines that keep the Navy operational," Tarkin told her. "Eleven operational cruisers were destroyed with impunity, costing the rebels less than two dozen fighters and bombers. What good is an escort that, statistically, does not even shoot down two small ships before getting itself destroyed? This is unacceptable to my military. I want alternatives. *Now*."

"Oh, um, yes, of course, hold on..." Onara Kuat rubbed her eyes and began to search her company's databanks on her end. She knew well enough to jump when the Chancellor said to jump, unlike many senators, including her sector's own. "There is no real alternative to the *Arquitens* in the three hundred meter range, my lord. If you would like to replace the current orders with equal tonnage of the *Gladiator*-class, we would be happy to oblige." Yes, the Kuatis didn't want to lose a single credit of contracts after so many of the new *Imperator*s had been put on hold. But the *Gladiator*-class was old, and hardly more heavily armed than the *Arquitens*. Those wouldn't do. Tarkin considered rubbing Kuat's deficiency in small craft in their faces, and forcing them to build more *Consular* C70 refits, paying licensing fees to Corellia for every ship, but he needed Kuat Drive Yards. One day, one day soon, he'd have those half-finished *Imperator* hulks towed out of mothballing in high Kuat orbit, back into their spacedocks to be finished.

"That won't be acceptable," said Tarkin. "Show me what you have in development."

Onara Kuat, head of the company, and not research and development, typed frantically away at her computer, strain on her face. "Ah, what about this?" she asked, bringing up the hologram of one of the most peculiar ships Tarkin had ever seen. For a moment, he thought it a rebel ship out of Minntooine's yards. But no, it had Kuat's signature lines; it looked like one triangle pointing down, attached to another more classically, if narrow, Kuati triangle in the back. A dozen dual-purpose turbolasers, a dozen point defense laser cannons, and a dozen missile tubes already put the ship far ahead of the *Arquitens,* but what really made Tarkin raise an eyebrow was its complement. Twenty-four V-wings could be stored in its twenty-five hundred square meter hangar, or twelve V-wings and four NTB-630 bombers. There was a note stating the bombers needed to have their wings remain folded until they were about to launch, but even the fact they'd managed to fit four bombers into a three hundred meter ship's internal hangar was astounding. There was a dorsal door to launch ships from and a door on the port side of the ship to recover ships from.

"Impressive," said Tarkin. "Why aren't we building this?"

"The *Nebulon*-A was a flawed design, and the Navy lost interest in it. We call this one the *Nebulon*-B, and we've got plans to produce a handful for private trial runs," said Onara Kuat.

"The Republic will place a preliminary order for a thousand," said Tarkin. "With nine thousand more pending on operational performance."

"A thousand-?" Kuat choked out.

"My lord-" Director Orlok began to say quietly.

Tarkin held up his hand. "My order stands. Make it happen."

"It will be done, my lord," said Onara Kuat, with a bow. The hologram went off.

"This is a bold move, Chancellor," said Orlok. "We don't know what problems those ships might have. That's *a lot* of firepower in a three hundred meter package."

"We'll simply work the problems out in service, then," said Tarkin. "This is exactly the ship we need to make those rebel raiders think twice before hitting our convoys. And when we can resume the war in full, the *Imperator*s and *Tector*s won't be far behind. Overwhelming firepower, Director, that is how we will win this war."

Little did Orlok know of the battle station under construction–though he was vaguely aware of its existence–which would bring Tarkin's doctrine of firepower to its logical conclusion. *I'll need a weapon for that thing, first, though...*

Just tell the truth, Sanya, like Alize said. That was the mantra she repeated, as she rang Esera's cabin door. It opened, and there the girl was, changed and showered since the sparring match, looking much younger in a looser shirt and shorts and no makeup. She'd probably been getting ready for bed. Sanya was thankful for that, it made Esera far less intimidating when she didn't look like a noblewoman or investment banker. She could tell a harmless-looking normal eighteen year old girl the truth.

"Hey," said Sanya. "You got a moment?"

"Yeah, of course," said Esera. "Come in."

Esera's cabin was littered with little objects. Geometric objects. *Holocrons?* "Nice, uh, stuff," said Sanya.

"Grievous has me snooping through Dooku's holocrons. *All* of them. I'm getting close to the end," said Esera. There was a tension in her voice that put Sanya at unease, but she'd have to tackle that later. Esera sat at a desk, while Sanya took one of the metal chairs that looked utterly unused. There was nothing indicating she ever had company or was prepared for it. Sitting in a chair in front of a desk didn't fit well for a casual conversation setting. This felt more like a formal meeting.

"You find anything interesting?" asked Sanya.

"That's classified. How can I help you, Sanya?"

Yeah, this really feels formal, thought Sanya. "I want to talk about us. Like, the nature of our relationship."

"Uh..." A bit of pink entered Esera's cheeks.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Esera. Not *that* kind of relationship." Even though Sanya was usually the one with her mind in the gutter. "I mean back at the Temple, and now."

"Oh?" She was curious, now. Esera's head tilted a little.

"I didn't want to tell you this, because I felt it'd be ungrateful. Alize said I should though, and she's right. We're both adults, now. We can be honest with each other. But I want to make it clear, I *am* incredibly grateful you took me in. This isn't where I imagined my life would take me, but whatever, I'm here, that's what counts."

"You and me both," said Esera.

"So, about the Temple days. Would you say we were friends?" asked Sanya.

"You were one of my only friends. Only friend, really," Esera said. "I guess that makes you my best friend by default." She smiled a little, but there was a pain in her eyes. The Temple days weren't pleasant to remember for her, that was clear.

"It, uh, wasn't entirely mutual," said Sanya.

Esera hadn't expected those words. Her face turned concerned, anxious.

"Look, I hate awkward moments like these, but I hate sustained awkwardness even more, and that's what I've been feeling here. When Kenobi started asking me about you back on Agamar, I had to tell him *I don't know.* Because I didn't know you. You knew me, you followed me around, but you were just kinda... there. I put up with it because I felt sorry for you. When I saw you down on Raxus, I didn't even recognize you. I've got no idea who you are, Esera. Not then, not now. And I think you need to know that."

"I see," said Esera. She'd gotten control of her face now, but her body language still told all. Arms crossed under her chest, eyes slightly narrowed, leaning back in her chair; the signs of someone closing themselves off.

"I think I owe it to you to be honest about all that," said Sanya. "You don't owe me anything for the old days, you've got no debts or obligations. Back then you were a few steps above a stranger. Now, you're a former Jedi knight, working for Grievous, you've got a ship, and a noble title, apparently... You *are* a stranger to me. I don't want you to be a stranger to me. I want us to trust each other. But if that's going to happen, I needed to come clean with you first. I'm laying everything on the table. No secrets."

The mature thing for Esera to do would have been to accept the past wasn't as idealized as she'd imagined it to be, and accept Sanya's honesty in good faith. But Esera was also an eighteen year old, her maturity was a work in progress.

"That'll be all, Sanya," she said, her voice cold and calm. "Thank you for your visit."

"Esera, I-"

"Thank you for your visit."

That was the nice way to say *get out.* Sanya sighed in the corridor. Hopefully Esera would come around in a few days. After all, the girl she'd thought was her best and only friend in her childhood had merely told her she was little more than a stranger to her, then and now. "Thanks, Alize," Sanya said to the empty hall. "Telling the truth really gets you places, doesn't it?"

Author's doctoral thesis: How much do you want to bet someone's going to call this a filler chapter? Because character development never influences anything in ASD... The introduction of Sanya's POV has been a long time in the making, since her first mention in chapter 30, which was about a year ago in real time from the publishing of this chapter. Her POV sections take up most of the chapter, since she had a lot to discover. Sanya might be our first "normie" POV in ASD, a social, sensual individual without much ambition who needs to be around others (sometimes *very* closely) to feel fulfilled. Personally, I don't understand normies, since what's normal to me is living like Esera does, but I've tried my best to put myself in such a person's shoes while writing her. Never say I don't celebrate diversity in my works!

Even longer in the making has been the fact Esera's not quite a baseline human. A lot of themes in her POVs have been explained. Namely, Esera's general lack of discomfort in cold climates that aren't home and sensitivity to hot climates, her willingness to eat anything, and why she's so relatively short (this was actually addressed last chapter, but not in full). I've been waiting for half a decade to drop this lore. Ironic that it was a chapter with zero Esera POVs that explains all this, but it kinda had to be, because Sanya notices something doesn't add up and it's Voyan who's done all the research on the people he lives with (chapter 35). Besides, Esera is not always reliable as a narrator, as valued reviewer "ZakoBattleDroid" has noticed in the past... We'll be meeting more non-baseline human cultures in the future, so if you enjoy learning about human physiological adaptations to environments, you're in luck.

The *Nebulon*-B has made its appearance, but it's not the beaten-up clunker from Empire Strikes Back. There's a fellow on Youtube called EC Henry who made a video called "The IMPERIAL Nebulon-B Frigate (Fanmade design)" which I saw recently and I loved it so much I inserted it into this chapter. That wasn't a years-long plot in the making, that's something I did the other night. Because it's cool. And I was planning to dab on the *Arquitens* anyway, just with a really up-gunned *Pelta* in prior drafts. But the *Nebulon*-B (especially EC Henry's rendition of the Imperial version) looks a lot better and fulfills my fetish for small but powerful warships. Go check out his channel if you don't know about it, it's full of goodies.

I have two final things I'd like to bring up. First off, to valued reviewer "Xager the Chaos King:" I will never stop complaining about TCW, but thank you for being brave enough to disagree with my takes. I don't want anyone to be afraid to voice criticism of my writing or my opinions. If I was afraid, I wouldn't have put this on the internet.

Second off, chapter 40 is a major landmark. We are six years into the planning/writing of this story, and six months into the war. That's one month of story-timeline per real year of writing this fic, and two of those months we totally skipped through between chapters 39 and 40. Some of you valued reviewers have said I could write an original novel with my skills (this is actually my plan, stay tuned). But I can't do this until ASD's completion is close to being a reality. 6 years to crawl through 6 months has been tortuously slow for me and resulted in all my original projects not going anywhere because I have this hanging over my head. I'm not burned out; if anything, I'm more motivated than I've ever been. I know exactly where I'm going, we've only got a few major characters left to meet (two and a half, really), the plot is locked in, so we're kicking it into overdrive. It's gonna be Yuge with a capital Y.

Thank you for reading my doctoral thesis. As always, shout-out to beta reader Corshy who catches the myriad of silly errors I don't see.

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